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I WAS MADE IN THE USUAL WAY, though whether I came here head-first or tail-first I don't know, since my mother didn't stay around long enough to tell me, and my father, if he knew me at all, never came by to admit it, but my life having turned out the way it has, I suspect I came out tail-first and that my head still dreamed in the dark while my legs went thrashing about in the light of this world. One way or the other I got out whole and got my bellybutton neatly knotted, and what happened over the next few days or weeks I can't even guess at.

Then came the moment I've heard about over and over again. It comes like this. It comes KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK. Then Pacifico Cavallù pushes back his chair and slowly gets up from the long table, his white linen napkin still tucked in his vest as he strolls across the big square hall and pulls open the front door. Outside it's all black sky and freshly fallen snow and, down at his feet, a large oval laundry basket with a mound of blankets and — “Good God!” he says. Now there's a clatter of

dropped silverware and the scrape of chairs and everyone comes running to the door to get a look. Bixio begins to bark and Nora, the housemaid, has to climb a chair to see over the heads of the grownups. For a moment everyone crowds the doorway but nobody moves — Pacifico is still peering into the dark where a few silent snowflakes tumble through the doorlight — then Marianna steps past him, warily lifts the basket and carries it on her hip to the dining room.

There were fifteen people in the Cavallù house that night. First of all there were the parents — that's Pacifico and Marianna Cavallù — Pacifico at this end of the table, a sturdy man with beautiful eyes and a short iron-colored beard, and big Marianna at the other end, a woman such as you might find carved on the prow of a ship, with her broad face and her hair in a black braided crown. Their children ran in age from ten to twenty-five and were known for being handsome, quick-witted and rash. They were seated on both sides of the long table — Lucia and Marissa and Bianca and Candida and Dante and Sandro and Silvio and Mercurio and Regina, along with Marissa's husband Nicolo, an aeronautical engineer, and Bianca's husband Fidèle, a stone cutter. And, of course, there was Carmela the cook and Nora the housemaid. That's two in the kitchen, thirteen at the table and me on the front piazza.

Mother Marianna shifted the wicker basket from her hip to her place at the table and everyone continued to speak at once, saying, "Look at those big eyes it could have died out there in the cold why our doorstep such big eyes for such a small little baby what kind of mother would leave her baby but why our doorstep could have died under these thin blankets came to the wrong house and so strong the way it holds my finger take a

look take those off and that one too and my God swaddling clothes unwrap the poor thing and let's take a look. Sfasciarlo! Sfasciarlo!" - Unwrap it! Unwrap it! Then the women sang "Ah-ha!" And the men chorused "Oh-ho!" and Regina, the youngest, said, "Look at his little ucelino," — birdie — while Mercurio, a year older, frowned and blushed.

"He's going to be strong," Pacifico said. "You can tell by the legs."

"A Calabrian," Marianna said. "They wrap them that way in Calabria."

"Mamà, they wrap them that way in Sicily, too," Lucia informed her.

"No. Not like that. That baby is Calabrese," her mother insisted. "He's been washed and rubbed with olive oil and then swaddled."

"It's terrible and I'm not ever doing that to mine," Marissa said.

"Anyway, he wasn't born in Sicily or Calabria. He was born right here in Massachusetts," Lucia said.

The naked infant was nested back on the blankets in the wicker basket which was handed up over the espresso cups, crushed walnut shells and dried figs to Pacifico. The table quieted while he unhooked the watch chain from his vest, drew out the gold timepiece and lowered it delicately along side the baby's head, close by his ear. For a moment no one drew breath, then the infant turned toward the tick-tick-tick. Pacifico, his face still heavy with concentration, abruptly hauled the watch up and lowered it down the other side. Again the infant turned his head and twisted about to find the ticking. Pacifico, hoisted the watch once more and held it directly above the baby's face, rolling the chain between his fingers just enough to start the gold and crystal flashing. The infant stared up,

fascinated. Pacifico slid the watch back into one of his vest pockets and looped the heavy gold chain across and then glanced up. “É bello,” he concluded. “He’s fine.”

Marissa’s husband Nicolo, a logical man, asked, “Did anyone look for a note?” Now everyone looked. They unfurled the blankets and gently shook them out, they went back through the big front hall and the vestibule to see if a little leaf of paper had dropped to the floor when they had trooped in, and they even went out onto the porch. There was no note. Regina had taken one of the blankets which wasn’t a blanket at all, but only a cheap kerchief. “Look at this. Can I keep it?” she asked. It was a square of thin blue cotton printed with a fanciful map of Sicily, one of a thousand such kerchiefs. “How does it look?” she asked, pulling it around her shoulders and turning her head to see the effect. “What do you think? Can I keep it?”

“No. It doesn’t belong to us,” Pacifico told her. “And neither does the baby.”

Marianna had taken the kerchief from her daughter and now she began to fold it. “Some poor confused woman didn’t know which side of the church the parish house was on. If it wasn’t so late we could take it over right now. Father McCarthy can find a home for it.”

“Not Mr McCarthy,” Pacifico told her. He refused to call any priest Father.

“All right. Father Basilio, then.”

One by one they fell silent as they watched Marianna tuck the kerchief around the baby in the basket. Carmela came and set a pan of warmed milk beside Marianna, looked without curiosity at the infant and then hobbled back to the kitchen. Nobody spoke. Bianca’s husband Fidèle lowered his little finger into the baby’s warm hand which closed tight around it.

“We can’t give him back,” Bianca said, breaking the silence. “We can’t just give him *away!*”

“He belongs with his mother,” big Marianna said firmly. “And his mother doesn’t live here.”

“But maybe the father is here,” Candida said. “After all, it could be Dante or Sandro or —” She shrieked and ducked aside, as Dante lunged across the table to throw his wine in her face, Sandro already on his feet, his chair crashing backward. She swept the wine from her cheek with the back of her hand. “All I mean is —”

“Candida!” her mother cried.

“She talks too much!” Silvio said.

“You!” Dante said.

“Me? What about me?” Candida retorted.

“You know what about you,” Sandro said.

“That’s enough,” Pacifico murmured, holding up his hand, palm outward.

The baby went on crying loudly in the sudden silence. Bianca swathed him in his blue map-kerchief and lifted him from the basket, cradling him in her arms, while her husband Fidèle brought up the pan of warm milk. He sat down beside his wife and sank a twisted corner of his napkin into the milk, saying, “He’s hungry. Let’s give him something to drink.”

AND HERE I AM, more than seven decades later, a vulgar old man with white hair on his privates and no time to wonder where I came from or where I'm going, because I'm too busy trying to make a name for myself. The parish house was on one side of St. Brigid's Church, the Cavallù house on the other, and my guardian angel, she — for surely angels are sexed — steered me to the right place. I was adopted then and there by Bianca and her husband Fidèle Stilamare. When I turned thirteen my parents gave me a diary in the hope that I would learn to spell if I wrote a paragraph at the end of each day, but after a few entries I quit writing and used it for a sketch pad, and have never succeeded in keeping a journal of any kind. Yet here I sit, writing any which way — *scribble, scribble, scribble*.

When I was growing up we had two autobiographies in our bookcase, a square brown one by Benjamin Franklin and a fancy red-and-gold one in Italian by Benvenuto Cellini, since each man had done great things in his way, though wise and prudent Franklin, a friendly guy, had no fire in his veins and Cellini, a good swordsman and sculptor, beat his women and bragged about it. My father admired Franklin for his hard work and scientific curiosity, but my mother liked Cellini for entertainment, forgiving him his sins because he was an artist and artists were heroes to her.

So I had thought to write a book of my life and views

after I had accomplished some great works and grown famous, which was an innocent thought with no vanity in it, for I was only a kid. We natural born princes of the world, we work for the glory of the work itself and for nothing else, still I had thought I would be famous by now or at least better known. And I don't have forever like I used to. My friends have begun to die off and my best and closest and dearest Mike Bruno is gone, gone, gone. Anyway, I have sat down to write this chronicle and not about myself alone, for I've never lived alone for long and hope I never do, and now will get on with this.

I DON'T KNOW WHO BIANCA AND FIDÈLE had envisioned when they dreamed of their first-born child, but they got me instead. They named me Renato, which means reborn, and gave me my birthday that same wintry night in March, and so it has been ever since. Now in my book, in *this* book, your true parents are the ones who love you and raise you, sit up with you when you're sick, whack you when you misbehave, teach you how to walk and talk, set you on your way and weep when you leave home. My father's name was Fidèle Stillamare, but instead of Fidèle he was called Fred. He liked to say he was just a stone cutter, but he was many other things as well — a mason and tiler and glazier, a sign maker, carver of letters in stone or wood, designer of alphabets, graphic artist and sculptor. We lived on the edge of town in a farm house on a long five-acre lot that went down to the dry bed of the old Middlesex Canal. Seventy years ago you could drive the back roads of these little towns outside Boston and when you came to houses with a vegetable patch out back, two or three fruit trees and a grape arbor made of iron pipe, you knew you were among the Italians and, in fact, you might be passing my home. *Stillamare's Cut Stone & Tile Company* was in the barn out back and employed two or three workmen, depending on the jobs my father had gotten. In winter he ate lunch with his men in the shop at a bench where my mother had set a pot of steaming coffee, and in summer

at a table with a pitcher of iced tea on it under the big maple tree by our kitchen door.

In my earliest memory I'm playing in the dirt at the edge of our vegetable garden – even now I can smell the damp gold dust on the underside of the tomato leaves and get the warm taste of the bright red tomato which a beautiful woman, one of my mother's sisters, has bitten open and sprinkled with salt and offered to me. In those days we spoke Italian in the kitchen and English when we walked down town. Italian sounded old fashioned and worn out, like our pots and soup spoons, whereas English was modern and sounded cleaner, but whenever I said anything like that my mother would slap me across the top of my head, saying, "Senti! In paradiso si parla la lingua di Dante. In heaven the angels speak Italian. Not English, Italian! Non dimenticare mai."

By the time my brother Bartolomeo was born I was four years old and already prince of our five acres, and a few years later I became king of the fields and woods. I knew the route of hidden creeks and the whereabouts of old stone walls that had crept into the woods years ago and been forgotten. On a rainy day I could run all the way from the Common to our house and not get wet, because I knew where to cross the streets and backyards in a zig-zag that went beneath an endless canopy of jutting eaves and elms and lilac bushes. I knew a friendly gray boulder shaped like a throne and knew a huge beech tree that had been half-uprooted in the Big Wind of 1938 and now grew at a slant, so you could walk up the trunk through a colonnade of branches, and I loved certain maples in whose slowly swaying branches I would be happy to rest even now. I knew how to call to crows, and when I called, they came. I knew where to find wild apples, blueberries, pears, Concord grapes, tadpoles, woodchucks, rotted

stumps, quartz crystals, mica and clay, and I knew where snakes went to shed their skins.

My grandmother Cavallù, my Nana, had nine children and when all of them had married I had eighteen uncles and aunts, and when they had children I had lots of cousins. My cousin Nick and I were about the same age, and my cousin Melissa about three years younger, and we spent a lot of time together when we were kids. We saw each other on the holidays, of course, but also every Sunday afternoon when our families would congregate to talk or play bocce and then sit down to coffee and, if we were lucky, some pastries and gelati. Furthermore, the three of us were shifted from house to house whenever our parents, still young and hot, wanted to have a weekend alone, and each spring another uncle or aunt got married and soon we were joined by more cousins, so there was troop of us children. Nick and I were the ringleaders of this pack, and if Nick wasn't around it was me and Melissa.

In August our families drove to the Cape where we used to swim or go digging for clams or pick beach plums, and if we stayed out of the way we could watch my father and uncle Nicolo and uncle Zitti pitch horse shoes — the iron shoe would rise from my dad's hand as lightly as a bird, and from uncle Nicolo it would whirl on its way, but from uncle Zitti it would tilt and veer and tumble and you never knew where it might land, because he was a philosopher and thought so much. Or we could watch our younger uncles build huge kites of bamboo and colored paper which they would launch from the sand dunes while their women, in swimsuits on the beach far below, waved encouragingly and smoked cigarettes, or lay back to sunbathe with a magazine spread open upon their face. (And now my nose, all on its own, suddenly re-

members the exciting sharp odor of the gun smoke when the men were shooting clay pigeons, the tangy smell of Melissa's rubber bathing cap, and the gentle scent of the kitchen olive oil we used for suntan lotion.) Back home in February we would skate across the frozen marsh and through the woods, or if it rained we would play indoors, sprawled on the floor, drawing pictures on those glossy white oblongs of cardboard that Uncle Zitti let us ransack from his freshly ironed shirts. I thought that everyone grew up this way, and it was only later I learned that the kids I went to school with didn't have a bunch of cousins to play with on weekends, but had to make do with whoever happened to be living in the neighborhood, a terrible thin social life.

My father saved my report cards and when I looked at them just now (pale yellow cards with his strong handsome signature on the back six times each year) I was astonished at how badly I had done. *He is inclined to waste time, and gets mischievous with his neighbors*, wrote grandmotherly Miss Blodgett. The reports show that I didn't obey promptly, didn't use time and materials wisely, didn't cooperate and was only average when it came to working at a given task. I was slow with number facts and even slower with letters. I didn't hate letters, quite the contrary. My father, being a sign painter and carver of inscriptions, loved the shapes of letters and numerals and he inspired that same love in me. On any day of the week our backyard had parts of the alphabet strewn around, leaning against the maple tree or stacked in a heap by the barn door, so I learned the names of letters, learned how to draw them and got to know their different personalities, but I didn't learn how to read and never asked to. When the time came, my mother took me to Hancock School and introduced me to Miss Gosling. There were

six grades (Miss Gosling, Miss Blodgett, Miss Ouellette, Miss Keane, Miss Tennyson, and Miss Shea) and reading was dinned into me for six years and eventually it took, though I never did learn how to spell.

The world was filled with things and each one had a face and a way of gesturing for attention — certain intricately carved chairs, house fronts, waters that winked or waved, trees that beckoned, muttered, sighed — and each one waited to be read, greeted or listened to. It turned out you didn't pay attention to these things or to pictures of them, but only to printed words. And after I learned to read words, those other things withdrew with injured dignity and even the boulders clammed up, refused to speak.

I loved to draw. I loved getting down on the floor on my stomach with a pencil and a sheet of my father's design paper or my uncle's shirt cardboard. I could draw better than anyone else, but it didn't count because they didn't teach it in school. Instead, we brought autumn leaves to class and traced them, then colored in the outline with wax crayons. In winter we cut snowflakes from folded tissue, or drew snow trees with white chalk on gray paper, and in spring we traced the bottom of our ink wells to make the sun and flowers. Our third grade class made a mural about Hiawatha's camp but I wasn't allowed to work on it, even though I was the best at drawing, because I was slow at numbers and reading. Of course, everybody knew that tracing and coloring were for children and we soon put that behind us and had Art Appreciation instead.

In Art Appreciation the teacher would show us a picture of a famous painting, like *The Angelus* by the famous French painter Jean Francois Millet, and she'd read to us about it. Then each of us was given a miniature picture of

it with stickum on the back which you licked, then you stuck it onto a sheet of construction paper. *The Angelus* was about a man and a woman working in a plowed field when they heard the church bell ringing, so they bowed their heads, and if you looked closely you could see the church belfry on the horizon. That was Art Appreciation. We Appreciated a lot of pictures like *The Age of Innocence* or *The Blue Boy* or the one about a dog that rescued people who fell off the dock into the sea, but they weren't very interesting and when we were through I decided I couldn't be a painter after all, because it was so dull.

We did a lot of singing and that was a joy. The teacher would blow a note on her pitch-pipe and we would hum it till her note and our humming blended together perfectly, then we'd sing. Also, we got a lot of poems by heart, which I still think is the best way, so I can still recite *The Ride of Paul Revere* and *To A Waterfowl*. And in penmanship we learned to lick a new steel nib just once before dipping it into the ink well, and we practiced the Palmer Method with an eraser balanced on the back of our writing hand.

Each time the teacher gave me my report card it surprised and frightened me how low the marks were, because I knew that my mother would read it and hand it back, saying, "You'll have to give this to your father yourself." And after my father read it he would shout, "Do you want to be a ditch digger? That's where you'll end up, digging ditches! Is *that* what you want?" That's where dumb Italians ended up. No, I didn't want that. Being a ditch digger would mean working beside people like that pig Norman Oldacre who liked to make loud farts and told bathroom jokes and who took me aside in the school yard one morning and beat me up so hard my eyes watered.

But I didn't feel stupid and I knew that the stupidist kid in my class wasn't me but fat Collins. The teacher told him he was the cow's tail because he always came in last, but Collins just sat there being fat and smiled and blinked his sleepy-lidded eyes and said nothing. He wasn't my friend but I thought it was cruel to call him the cow's tail and make fun of him just because he couldn't memorize. I felt I could learn anything and that I was as smart as everybody else and even nicer than some other kids — certainly nicer than Eddy O'Toole who said *fuck* even though he was an altar boy at St. Brigid's, or Betty Bender who talked back to the teacher, or Carol Shepherd who stuttered, and as good as Jack Sawyer or Sue Meadows or that too-sweet girl with the permanent raspberry stain on her cheek whose name I've forgotten. I used to watch the shadow of the window sash creep ever so slowly across my desk and my mind would wander.

It's hard to believe, but years ago the town pried all the slate from the classroom walls, sold our desks and turned the school into expensive condominiums with big windows. When we were there the janitor used to sprinkle green sawdust in front of his broom when he swept the black oiled floors, and the stair treads had scoops worn in from our shoes. The Boys' Room had a wall made of brownish copper with water drizzling down it. You peed against the wall and the water washed it down to a gutter where it drained away past a white cake of disinfectant that smelled so strong it made you hold your breath. The sign over the paper towel box said *Why take two when one will do?* There was a tall skinny kid, three years older than everyone else, whose father used to beat him in the street and he had to keep his head shaved because he got lice. This kid caught me by the woods one day, twisted my arm behind my back until I took off my clothes and

went swinging on the vines with him, then he unfolded his jackknife and said he'd get me if I told, but happily he was killed in boot camp three years later. Just before Christmas all the classes came out to the hall and each grade sang its own Christmas carol. The first grade had little voices so they sang *Wind in the Olive Trees*, the second grade was stronger so it sang *O, Little Town of Bethlehem*, and so on up to the sixth grade which sang *O, Come, All Ye Faithful!* When finally we were in sixth grade we were the last to sing and we stood very quietly in the hall and listened to the carol floating up from the little kids downstairs, singing in their sweet voices, and the songs went from room to room, getting stronger and richer and closer, and I felt this is what they meant when they told us about the angel chorus in heaven, this was what it sounds like.

Before I leave Hancock School I should introduce Miss Keane, my striking fourth grade teacher. All the gentle ancients at the school wore droopy sacks in mottled purples and moldy browns, illuminated by a lace collar or a pale cameo brooch, but handsome Miss Keane liked to wear silky white blouses that looked good to touch and a narrow black skirt that hissed excitedly against her stockings when she marched — tap! tap! tap! — down the aisle to see what we were doing. If we all had performed well, she would smile and take off her Mexican silver earrings and tell us about her trip to Mexico. But when we misbehaved she would angrily erase the blackboard, her bracelets jingling frantically, then snatch up her pointer and smack it to her white palm in rhythm with our chant, not ending till we reached *nine elevens are ninety-nine*.

From Miss Keane I learned the multiplication table and how to spell some words, not many, and about

volcanoes and cave men. And I learned that in Europe they thought it shameful to work with your hands (as my father did) and they looked down on a person who wore mended clothes (as I did), but here in the United States all citizens were created equal and it didn't matter what your last name was, because you could go to a public school and learn things and grow up to be whatever you wanted to be. Later, when I was in old Miss Tennyson's fifth grade, Miss Keane would step into my darkened bedroom and tie me naked to the bed, my arms like Christ crucified, then she'd pull my stiffened thing — like this, and this, and this! *this!* — until it fluttered in a strange soundless thunderbolt of pleasure, and sometimes Sue Meadows and Betty Bender slipped in behind her to see what was going on, their eyes shining with curiosity.